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CORRESPONDENCE.

Editor of the American Naturalist.

Sir:—Several articles have appeared in the *American Naturalist* of late on the common names of animals, and one of them introduces the question of their etymology. "There is in the human mind," as Max Müller sagely observes, "a craving after etymology, a wish to find out why such a thing should be called by such a name"; and this applies emphatically in the case of popular names in natural history.

Perhaps the most striking feature in the historical development of plant and animal vocabularies is the extent to which words have become metamorphosed, mutilated, deformed, or corrupted at the hands of the people, not only in English, but in all languages. One cannot but be impressed with the many curious travesties of the names of plants, insects, crustaceans, fishes, and higher animals which constitute a sort of verbal pathology, or "folk-etymology." There has been published recently a little essay on popular etymologies, which devotes considerable attention to instances of the latter description, and is sufficiently accurate to recommend itself to naturalists. We refer to *The Folk and their Word-Lore*, by A. Smythe Palmer (London, 1904), this being a companion work to the same author's *Folk-Etymology*.

Everyone is familiar with such typical examples of folk-etymology as "sparrow-grass," "cowcumber," and "shoe-mach," which are the popular recasting of familiar plant-names; but the majority of persons are probably unaware of the close verbal affinities existing between such words as lobster and locust, beaver and viper, crocodile and cockatrice, alligator and lizard, eagle-wood and alœ, and numerous other co-derivatives whose communal origin is more or less masked. When we read in old works, for instance, that "long oysters are a sort of crayfish," we do not immediately perceive that the latter word is only a modern modification of the older *crevish* (also written *crevis* and *crevice*), which in turn is derived from the same form that has yielded the French *écrevisse*, old-high German *Chrebiz*, and modern German *Krebs*; nor does the word "long oyster" or "longoister" resolve itself at first sight into an anglicized

form of the French *langouste*, or Spanish *langosta*, which lead us back to the Latin *locusta*. The example shows, however, how it is possible for folk-etymology to transform crayfish, which are indeed a variety of shell-fish, and may properly be described as long, into a "long oyster." So too "penny-winkle" for the shell-fish commonly called periwinkle, is a partial reversion to its original form *pine-wincla*.

Many extraordinary verbal complications are brought about through the tendency to assimilate words of a foreign or unfamiliar aspect into something of like sound that shall be more intelligible. Amongst the innumerable corruptions of plant-names to which this process gives rise, may be mentioned "bloody Mars," a kind of wheat, for *blé de Mars*; "Christian anthems" for chrysanthemums; the various forms of *Polly Andrews*, *Polly Ann*, or *polander* for polyanthus; "rosy-dandruns" for rhododendrons; and the correlative "high-belía" and "low-belía" as offshoots from lobelia. Amusing illustrations of the same tendency are furnished by the soubriquets under which famous race-horses are known to grooms and jockeys. Thus, Chemisette was nicknamed *Jimmy's hat*; Othello and Desdemona were familiarized into "Old Fellow" and "Thursday Morning"; and the Irish horse Usquebaugh became to the farrier *Huskeyball*.

Professor B. K. Emerson, in relating the following anecdote, offers some instructive comments on the tendency toward assimilation, or as he calls it, "the principle of attraction in language whereby words without meaning to their users tend to be modified into forms which at least appear intelligible." Writes the genial professor¹: "Many years ago I visited the British flagship *Bellerophon* in the harbor of Bermuda, and was told that when the ship was first named, the sailors wrestled with the sonorous but unmeaning name, and quickly transformed it into 'Billy-ruffian'; and it became at once intelligible, and belligerent, and satisfying. There arose, however, a contest in the fore-castle as to whether 'Billy-ruffian' or 'Bully-ruffian' was the correct thing,—certain rude fellows of the baser sort wishing to have the word pugnacious in both its proximal and distal extremities."

The significance of this and of similar incidents that are common to everyday experience consists in their being typical of a distinct

¹ Geological Myths: Vice-Presidential Address. *Proc. Amer. Assoc. Adv. Sci.*, 1897, pp. 101-126.

process. Words are first attracted into a form which has a meaning, and in its turn this meaning requires a justification; and this the meaning itself quickly suggests. An understanding of this process has not only solved many philological problems, but finds an application in natural science. Emerson, for instance, in the address referred to, is guided by it to a rational interpretation of famous geological myths; and in the hands of Fouqué, the site of at least one volcanic eruption known to have taken place within historical times has been identified solely by linguistic clues of this nature.

C. R. EASTMAN.

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